FIXING SPECIAL EDUCATION: 
A Book Review

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What Follows
- This presentation is a summary of the ideas presented in FIXING SPECIAL EDUCATION, a new book calling for a transformation of our special education system.
- All of the quotes are taken from the book.

What Works Well
- We now serve ALL kids.
- We mainstream.
- We are far more sensitive.
- We have more expertise.
- We include parents in the decision making.
- We have higher expectations for kids.
So What Needs Fixing?
- Too much litigation.
- Emphasis on process rather than results.
- Teachers buried in paperwork.
- Inequities.

Step One: Reducing Litigation

“Although due process litigation may have been appropriate in the early days of special education law, it no longer is….Lawyers, judges, and outside ‘experts’ should not be the ones to choose reading programs or to decide how to teach a child with autism. Education professionals, with due consideration of parents’ concerns, should do so.”

Step Two: Eliminate the Fear of Litigation

“When special education teachers leave the field, they often cite these reasons: burdensome paperwork and the negative, adversarial climate in our schools. These concerns are tied together, since paperwork is often part of the defensive practices teachers undertake to document their efforts, lest a lawsuit or threat of a lawsuit emerge.”
Step Three: Reduce Paperwork

“We need to end the false security and comfort that in filling out all those pieces of paper and holding all those meetings, we somehow improve student learning. Alas, we have no evidence to support that belief.”

Step Four: Drop the Labels

“We need to focus on educating ALL children—not on sorting and gatekeepers—and to provide services for students based on what they know and can do, not on WHO they are…. Services, including early intervention and targeted assistance, should be based on students’ current achievement, not on labels.”

Step Five: Change the Role of the Parents

“Relying on parents to enforce the law is problematic on many levels. For starters, it often destroys the relationship between school and home. It encourages schools to abandon their natural role as advocates for students. And it defies research: none supports this model as the ‘best practice’ for enhancing teaching and learning.”
Step Six: Treat Inclusion as a Means, not the End

“Inclusion grew out of the civil rights movement, not out of research-based approaches or best practices.”

We should “Follow civil rights goals and mottoes when they are consistent with best teaching practices.”

Step Seven: Focus on the WHOLE Child—Strengths and Weaknesses

In special education “we endlessly splice and dice weaknesses and diagnoses. The law mentions, but does not emphasize, student strengths. As a result, we have inadvertently created a generation of students with disabilities who focus on what they cannot do.”

Step Eight: Remind All that Education is an Active Process

“Although education is an active process, the IDEA and the NCLB focus on what schools can do FOR students.”

“Instead of focusing on SWD as active participants in their own education….these laws invest parents and students with ‘rights’ and place accountability for learning with others.”
Step Nine: End the Overuse of Accommodations

“When it comes to accommodations, we have created a mess. Accommodations are often viewed as a right. And too often they do lower standards, confuse the special education world, and distort the truth without providing appropriate notice to citizens, parents, students, and others.”

Step Ten: Educate ALL Students, Starting from Where They Are

“As discussed earlier, SWD have an entitlement for services. All other students do not—whether they are average, at-risk, advanced (e.g., gifted and talented), non-English speakers, or bored. Unfortunately, too often schools do not provide non-SWD with the same level of focus, funding, or effort.”

Step Eleven: Follow the Money

“Oops! We can’t really follow the money. We don’t know how much we spend of local, state, and federal dollars to educate students with disabilities—or where it is going.”
Step Twelve: Create an Action Plan

“Going backward is a false and paralyzing choice. It is NOT on the table, nor should it be.”

“Let us move beyond the IDEA’s historic success….We need to question assumptions and have the courage to change the way ‘we’ve always done it’ for almost 35 years.”

The Book

FIXING SPECIAL EDUCATION: 12 Steps to Transform a Broken System
By: Miriam Kurtzig Freedman

The Conference

- April 8, 2010, 1:30 to 4pm.
- Convention Center—San Antonio